

Ghost Flower 1 (for MM)

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Abstract

Ghost Flower 1 (for MM) is a pencil drawing made by tracing through the enlarged flower motif of a cheap mass-produced net curtain. The text reflects on the precise and laborious task of making the drawing and the speculations that the process engendered. Childhood memories of a familiar landscape framed by a net curtain are evoked, alongside ruminations on the unknown designer of the motif. The industrial process that the net curtain has endured during its journey to market is considered, and its long history and shifting relationship to taste. As the drawing progresses the artist contemplates the act as a translation, a doubling that produces a haunting intimacy with the object.

Figure 1: *Ghost Flower 1 (for MM)*, 2018. Pencil on paper 102×138 cm. Courtesy of artist.

Ghost Flower 1 begins as a task, precise and tedious. It is pared back to some basic rules: draw only the *holes* from a piece of mass-produced net curtain, on white paper, with an H graded pencil. I do my best to empty out skill and aesthetic decision-making. The time invested in the process is synonymous with the desire to understand the netted object and its flower motif. I apply the pencil, tracing the inside of each hole. There is no shading or smudging or rubbing out. Soft yet brittle, greasy and metallic, graphite is a crystalline form of carbon. I watch it adhere to the paper. It is a physical activity, taxing on my eyes and shoulders. Each pencil becomes slippery in my hand as it slowly reduces in size. I smell the wood as I sharpen and marvel at the difference that it makes to the precision of the line. I try to be consistent. A new pencil is a small pleasure amidst the monotony. The graphite slides over the paper or snags on flecks of grain and I consider this surface – the pulping, floating and bleaching. I quickly set up a rhythm, sub dividing areas and enjoying modest rewards as each part is completed.

As I become proficient with the process my mental state shifts to one of focused attention. The monotone activity unblocks a memory, spending hours' as a teenager, day-dreaming, looking through my bedroom window at a melancholy group of trees called the Seven Sisters, on a distant hill in West Yorkshire. Seen through net curtains, the image of the seven trees, bent together against the bitter wind, evoked a wordless yearning. But I was held by something less romantic too; the formal play of the netted pattern interacting with the landscape; and a tension between nearness and farness, surface and depth.

The click of a sharpened point breaking on the paper is a jolt that brings me back to my flower motif. I imagine that it started life as a digital image on a screen. As I trace its holes I consider the unknown designer, their artistry, skill and intentions. Did economic constraints limit the design process to a simple choice from a stock of popular motifs, or was the designer concerned with conveying an idealized English countryside and an echo of working-class aspiration? Does this stylized flower motif hold a residue of the nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts movement and its values, a romantic idealization of nature and critique of industrialization?

I think about the net curtain's constituent parts and processes, and how many hands it passes through, witnessing points of remuneration and exploitation during its journey to market. People, materials and machines endure the noise, dust and drudgery of the process, the polyester thread forming its pattern through a diagonal looping of warp and weft. The domestic net curtain has also been on an ideological journey. Carol Quarini describes net curtains as 'physically and ideologically' products of the Industrial Revolution, mirroring the invention of domesticity and the gendered

separation of home and work. Quarini positions the net curtain as a permeable surface that simultaneously conceals and reveals, observes and absorbs from a position at the margin of the home and the outside world (2011: 110). Despite a long history and shifting relationship to taste, they remain a strong class signifier (Perry 2016, n.pag). I harness their inferior status to make ‘beautiful’ but ‘dumb’ drawings that mirror my ambivalence towards hierarchies of taste.

As I redirect my attention to the task I acknowledge that I also feel ambivalent about the process itself. The surface of the drawing seems bloated with the investment of time, the labour of the artist. Is it flaunting its attention to detail and valorizing the hand-made over the mechanized? Does this become offensive in the way it mimics the repetitive labour of the manufacturing process? Or can value be ascribed to the empathy accrued through attentive looking, touching and thinking? Writing about the work of Kate Davies, Dominic Patterson calls this ‘[...] a kind of radical care [...] an intimacy with specific images that emerges in the days and weeks she dedicates to making drawings [...]’ (2013, n.pag). The process that I am subjecting myself to engenders an intimacy with the physical and ideological topography of the net curtain. Tracing the patterns of the motif functions as a re-enactment of the gestures of its manufacture and proposes drawing as ‘a space where senses, subjects and bodies touch, however indirectly?’ (Patterson 2013, n.pag).

The unremarkable manufactured object seems a crass subject on which to lavish all this attention; nonetheless it has a hold on me. This is not my first net curtain drawing. As I methodically trace my latest motif, I realize that the holes in the net are getting progressively larger with each new drawing. ‘Ghost Flower 1’ is over a metre

high, its petals reaching out like an over-excited child. The shift of scale accentuates my decision to draw the *holes* in the net and how this gives rise to a reversal, a kind of inside-out version. I begin to understand that I am not making a *copy*, but a *translation* – from a material object with its own meaning and value, into something with a different status. Bryan Eccleshall proposes that ‘[t]he act of translation, generates hybrid objects that are positioned, Janus-like, on a threshold between spaces’ (2014, n.pag).

Janus, the ancient Roman god of duality, has a body with two heads. As the drawing nears completion, the idea of double-headed splitting and its relationship to ambivalence is at the back of my mind. I make the seemingly intuitive decision to include the cut and ragged edge of my piece of net curtain and am surprised by the perceptual shift that occurs; the netted drawn surface appears to detach and float a fraction above its paper ground. The pattern asserts itself on the page as ‘hybrid object’ with a surface and space of real dimension. The floating porous object that has surfaced seems not so much a boundary, but rather a site of encounter where cultural, material and personal significance can coalesce.

What is the nature of the understanding that I gain through the simple process of drawing this prosaic object? I began with the desire to understand the material and ideological journey of the netted object, harnessing drawing as an attentive-looking, touching and thinking and becoming intimate with my subject. However, by recasting drawing as an act of translation, the notion of intimacy deepens as my own material and ideological positions and associations come into play. The net curtain passes through a particular body and mind and thus *observation* becomes *encounter*, an

experience of drawing *with* rather than a drawing *of*. Tavi Meraud articulates this shift in intimacy as ‘possession’ that is *more* than the closeness negotiated by touch – ‘possession in that doubled sense of “to own” but to oneself be owned, haunted’ (2017: 159).

References

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Contributor details

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